

Have You Come Here to Die?

A talk given by Ajahn Brahmavamso to the monks at Bodhinyana Monastery during the 2004 Rains Retreat

When we are meditating we often encounter our defilements, and this is one of the wonderful things about our rains retreat – there is no escape – or at least it is not easy to escape. You'd have to be pretty ingenious to find ways of escaping from this monastery at this time of the year. So there's nothing much to do but to face your own mind. You have two choices, either you suffer or you get peaceful. Out of those two I'd encourage the latter. Get peaceful, and calm the mind.

There are many tricks to help you calm the mind. We think of different ways to be able to do this same old practice of letting go, giving up, renouncing, letting go of controlling, and stopping attachment and craving. I think I talk about these things every week. So today I am going to be talking about one of the main meditation techniques, but in a different way. I'm going to talk about it from the perspective of dying. I always remember one of the common phrases of Ajahn Chah, when I was in his monastery in Thailand. He'd come up to you and ask, "Have you come here to die?", and of course, it's very strange that someone would ask that because you'd be thinking "I haven't come here to die, I've come here to get Enlightened, and to get nice meditations", but he'd ask, "Have you come here to die?" And because Ajahn Chah was always repeating that phrase, it became very clear that this idea of dying is a very profound and useful one. So this is what I'm going to be talking about today.

Imagine You're Dying Now

If your meditation is not going well, imagine yourself dying, imagine what it would be like to die. Start the meditation specifically for that one purpose. I don't really mean that you should end up as a corpse, what I really mean is for you to let go. That is what real dying is. When a person dies they have to let go, they have to renounce. "Everything which is 'mine', beloved and pleasing", gets taken away from you when you die. So here we are, practising dying. We are imagining dying by willingly giving up all of those things, which in this context we clearly realise do not belong to us. They are not 'mine', They are not a 'self' (*attā*) – as we have just been chanting in the Anattālakkhana Sutta (SN 22.59).

Now imagine yourself sitting in meditation and letting go of all those things that you are concerned about, all the little projects, plans, and business you have. Put them in the perspective of dying, so that you can truly let them go. In this perspective it is very easy to let go of things. A while ago someone asked me some questions about the Rattapala Sutta (MN 82). I read it the other day and it has beautiful sayings about the reasons for a person to let go. So many people die with unfinished business. They die still craving, they die with things uncompleted. So, have you completed all your tasks yet? Have you really fulfilled your mission in this monastery? The only way to do that is by remembering that old saying of Ajahn Buddhadasa's, "What's done is finished", and if you can understand the deep message of that phrase, you can really die to your past.

Whatever has gone – you're finished with it. You really truly renounce it because you imagine yourself dying. If this is the moment of your death, all that past business and stuff does not matter. What does it really matter what this person said, or what that person did? What does it really matter about all the possessions in your hut, all your books, robes and other things, that as monks and renunciants you spend too much time worrying about? You don't need to worry about the latest fashions. The best bowl, or type of robe, or this bag for this type of requisite, or that bag for that type of requisite – that's just materialism. Imagine yourself dying now. Why do you worry about such things? You've only a day left, so a patch is enough on the robe, you don't need to get a new one. Imagine yourself dying as you sit cross legged on your meditation cushion, or wherever you sit. When you imagine yourself dying – all those things that would upset your meditation and fill your mind, start to disappear. The possessions in your hut, have done their job, they've taken you this far. You don't need them anymore because you are dying now. All your relations and friends, you die to all of them, so you don't carry them into the meditation. You imagine this is happening and you do really come to the seat to die to your world. You die to your past.

It's interesting to walk through the graveyards of towns, and see that for the first few years after a person dies there may be a head stone, maybe someone remembers, but after twenty, thirty, or forty years, they could bulldoze the graves because the land is so valuable, and plant somebody else in there. So even your head stone just crumbles to dust. All record of you living here is gone, because no one remembers who you were or what you did. Isn't that beautiful? So why not do that right now? Bulldoze this idea of who you are, of your 'self', die to your reputation. When I say die to your reputation I mean to your past, where you came from and who you think you are. When you think of a headstone for this body, with your name on it indicating who you were in this monastery, where you've come from, how many rains you've had, whether you're a monk, novice or *anagàrika*, imagine this granite headstone crumbling away to dust until there's no record of your life. Only then can you really say you've died to this body, with all its history. Imagine how free you'd feel then. When you're dying to your past it's not going to come up into your meditation, it's as if it's disappeared. You're free.

The Cocoon of Death

If your mind is very active and it thinks a lot, you can do these as imaginary exercises in you meditation. Harness that thinking. If you're going to think, let's make use of it. If you can't beat them join them. Start to think of yourself as a headstone crumbling away. Your past is disappearing like the leaves from a diary being torn out, burnt to ashes, and thrown to the four winds – so you have no record of all your achievements, of all the things that you've strived for and done. They've all gone. Think of all this achieving business you have in your meditation, trying to get somewhere. What are you trying to prove? For meditators, so much of the meditation comes from the 'self', from the 'ego', wanting to crack it, wanting to get the *jhànas* ¹, wanting to get the *magga phala* (the fruit of the Eightfold Path ²). The reason the meditation doesn't work is because of you, you're 'doing' it. It's just one more thing you want to achieve in this world. Just an achievement of the ego, another medal you can put on the ego's chest, that's all those things are – that's why it doesn't work. So why don't you die to all achievements, die to this self which wants all this stuff, because in the end no one is going to remember you. You're going to disappear and fade away for ever – so why not do that now.

The way to the achievements is by dying to them. So we die to this idea of our 'self', our body, our past, and our future, because in reality we haven't got any. Everyone in this monastery has no future here. Wonderful! As the abbot, I've no future here. You die to that. When you're about to leave this body your future is gone. All your plans get torn up, you're about to expire from this body, your last breath is about to be completed. Where are the plans when you're about to go, when you're about to die? So when you imagine yourself dying in this very moment you die to all the future plans of what you're going to do when you leave here or what you're going to do next week.

Imagination and the contemplation or reflection on death in this way, quickly brings you into the present moment. Sometimes, people ask, "How can you do this?" "How can you actually achieve present moment awareness?" Just think of dying. Think this moment is my dying moment. Imagine it, put yourself in that situation and then you know what present moment awareness is. Death is the one final act of renunciation, renouncing your body, your senses, your past and your future. Why is it hard to do that? Because, when you die you are letting go of what you think yourself to be. Dying goes against the way of accumulating, of living, of being, which is all a function of a 'self', of a 'me'. "I want to be, I want to live, I want to do things, and I want to accumulate things. I want possessions, experiences and attainments" – that is the path of the world which keeps *saüsàra* ³ rolling on. The path of death, if we don't resist it, is the path of all of *saüsàra* disappearing and all of our possessions being taken away from us. All our illusions of thinking we are a body and thinking we are our things, is taken away. It's challenging us, that is why people are afraid of death, because it is the death of our possessions and the death of our possessions is a challenge to the very idea of ownership and control. When you die you can't control anymore. The 'controller' is also dying, it's expiring. As we imagine ourself doing this, it gets much easier to actually let go of things. We let go of our body – imagine yourself just breathing, let go of the breath because you're dying – this is my last breath right now. You find you become very aware of the breath when you imagine yourself dying. The next breath, you've got one more, so you watch that very, very carefully – soon it dies. All this dying business gives you a focus, gives you an appreciation of every breath. You've died to the world, and the breath is the only thing that you've got left, then your last breath, which is this one now. Breath meditation becomes so easy when you imagine yourself dying. Put death all around you. Imagine it. Contemplate it as if you were meditating in this cocoon called death. Imagine this cocoon called death surrounding you, embracing you. It keeps out all the defilements, all the past and future, all the silly ideas of ownership, possession. Thinking you are this body and

all the attachments, all the past and future, all the silly ideas of ownership, possession. Thinking you are this body and that these things really concern you is all put aside in the cocoon of the death reflections.

In the cocoon it's easy to be in the present moment, easy to watch the breath because you're dying to the world, and of course the most wonderful thing about death is when the five senses stop at last. All this seeing and hearing business, how many of you have spent hours reading books or just seeing things. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the seeing was just 'the seen'? Listening to talks on the CD's, even that hearing would just be 'the heard'. Haven't you had enough of just seeing and hearing yet? All those things that are still exciting you, are still interesting you – why is it so hard to let go of these things in the meditation. As I've said many times before, this is what attachment is. We think we own our hearing, and our seeing. We think that these things are mine, that they are a part of me. That's why we refuse to let them go, because it's as if something of us is going, something of us is dying when we get into deep meditation – that's why we get afraid.

Allow yourself to die to all seeing; this is the last thing I am ever going to see in this life as I close my eyes to meditate. This is the last sound I'm going to hear, I'll let go of hearing altogether. I'm just feeling my body for the last time and then my body's going to disappear. This helps you to let go of the senses. These senses are really controlling you. They've always irritated you. They're always demanding you pay attention to them, filling your mind, so much so, that the mind consciousness, the citta is hardly known to you. It's just these five senses playing around with you, pulling you by the nose from life to life, just dragging you through the ups and downs of *saṁsāra*. See if you can die to the five sense world. If you die to the five sense world, and die to the body, all of those concerns just vanish, you're dead.

When you're dead the only thing that is left is the mind. When a person dies it is the stream of consciousness that goes from life to life, and it's that mind which goes seeking out a new place to be born. But at least you know, that is what's left when you die to the body and the five senses. If you die to the body and the five senses the *nimitta*⁴ comes up, in the same way that when a person dies they go towards the light. If you haven't seen it yet and you want to find the *nimitta*, imagine yourself dying. As you imagine it, you build up these imaginary reflections and contemplations, filling yourself with that perception, and then you'll find that you do turn off from the body. You do turn off from the senses. You have come here to die. You die to the things of the world and die to possessions. You die to be the real monk, the hermit who goes towards the cave of the heart, away from the world of bodies, sights, and sounds.

Where the *Nimittas* Live

Caves are wonderful places to meditate in – I'm talking about deep caves in the mountains – because they were so dark, and you can't hear if anything is going on outside. While I was in one of those caves, there was a big storm, a violent thunderstorm. I was in that cave for about five or six hours and when I came out the villagers told me about the storm and asked, "Did you hear the violent storm?" I didn't hear anything – not that I was in a great meditation – I was just deep in a real cave, a limestone cave. If you go into the cave of the heart it is the same thing. The cave of the heart is where you die to sight and sound. It's all black; you don't see anything or hear anything. The body is cool and it just disappears. The cave of the heart is where the *nimittas* live. In the cave of the heart you know you've died to the body and died to the senses. That's how these deep meditation experiences are a rehearsal for dying.

Why is it, that people can't get those *nimittas*? It's because they're not ready to die yet. I'll just get this one thing out of the way and then I'll be ready. But you'll find there is always one more thing, so you die unfulfilled, unfinished. Remember what Ajahn Buddhadasa said, "What's done is finished". So, when you sit down what is done is all finished, you are finished. Die to your body, die to your past and your future, and die to all your projects. Close your eyes and don't see again. Close your ears so that you can't hear. Close down your feelings in the body, so that the whole body disappears. It dies on you, and then you find in death that the beautiful *nimittas* come up. They are so peaceful, beautiful, and wonderful. Understand that this type of death is freedom. The Buddha doesn't praise just any death. In the Dhammapada (verse 334) he said that you go to another body. The sort of death the Buddha praises is when you put an end to all bodies.

Are you ready to die yet? If you're afraid to die the *nimittas* will never arise. So imagine death, bring it into your mind, fill your mind with this concept and see if there is any fear left. If there is fear left, then it's always a sign of an attachment. Fear is always a sign that something you cherish is about to be taken away from you. If it wasn't yours

there would be no fear. If you knew it didn't belong to you, you could give it away so easily. So check yourself out to see what attachments are left, see if you're ready to die, and practise dying. As you die to the body and the five senses, nimittas come up but you've still got a bit more dying to do. After the nimitta there is the last trace of controlling. You've got to die to your will. Allowing the will to die is a scary thing. I've pointed out to you many times that you think your will is you. It's so close to your idea of a self, of who you think you are, that to allow that one to disappear is very, very scary. This is where you are really dying.

Here, part of the mind is dying, the will, the vedena ⁵ and the potential to do. When you are dying you understand that so much of your power is taken away from you. In old age you may will the hand to lift up but it just won't do it anymore. You might will the mouth to speak, but it just doesn't do it anymore. You may will yourself to chant but you forget the words. You find out in old age that the will isn't so powerful anymore. Was it ever really powerful, or is it that now you are seeing its true nature? When you die much of the will dies with you. Your ability to control is seen for what it really was all along – just a mirage, a myth, a magician's trick. You always thought you were in charge, but death shows you just how in charge you really were. Imagine yourself dying, getting completely out of control, where you can't control your bowels and you can't control your urine or anything else. You struggle for the last breath and you cannot control that either. Imagine what that's like, imagine completely letting go of control, allowing the breath to stop, allowing the body to die, allowing this thing that never really belonged to you anyway, to just fade away. Imagine this breath and this body, just like the leaves and twigs in the Jeta Grove – someone's taken them away to burn. They have taken away your body, your past and your future, everything you thought you were and thought you owned, your family, the whole record of your life – they've taken it all away to burn at your death.

You are thinking about this now while you are still alive you're letting go. You're abandoning everything, letting go with a capital L-E-T G-O and it becomes so freeing. If you can do this, nimittas come up so easily. If you can do this you stop controlling the nimitta. It's not yours. The will is seen for what it truly is. It's this great con, this great deceit, thinking that you're in charge and that you can really get it together. Make this will smart and sharp, make this will with lots and lots of insight, then you can be really Enlightened. You can do whatever you want. If you can just train your will you think that, that is going to be the way to Enlightenment. You know through death that this will is beyond you, beyond your control. To control the 'controller' is just more frustration. In the end you see this will for what it truly is. In the light of death – will stops. At least most of it stops at death, you can't control your body, you can't control most of the senses, but we still think we can control our mind.

We think we have the freedom of thoughts, but why not die to your thoughts as well. These little thoughts that you have – what are they all made of anyway? They're all made of the stuff of the world. They're made from the fabric of the experiences of your life. You plan, you fantasize, and you describe all this thinking that is going on. What will it be like when you die? Where do the thoughts fit in at the moment of death? Wouldn't it be wonderful to die free, free of all these thoughts. Imagine the thinking process dying, the last thought spluttering for its last moment of existence, and then the thoughts never arising for hours. Imagine what that's like – freedom from this great irritation. Freedom from this thinking mind, which convinces you, that now you're happy, now you're sad, now this person likes you, now they think you're an idiot. All this thinking drives you to anger, ill will, lust, desire, suffering, and to rebirth. Imagine all that dying so you can't think anymore. It just stops. You need thinking to stop completely before you really know the nimitta. Nimittas come in the silence. That is the reason those experiences are like a death. So much of your world has died; you are in a different space. It's like a heaven realm. You've died and this beautiful nimitta is all that's there.

Sometimes people may think that it's a god or a deva ⁶ or whatever. That just depends on how fanciful your mind is. Simple people with a pure mind will just see it as a nimitta, just a beautiful light. You've died to the world, you can't remember, you can't hear or know anything, even the thoughts have died, and you're still at last.

The Realm of the Mind

People who are very attached, who don't know how to die often get very scared when they experience their first sign of a nimitta. Why? Because they are dying, and they're experiencing what it's like. Allow yourself to die. It's not as bad as people make out, and when you die from the world temporarily, you can leave the whole world of the body and the five senses. Then if you stay in the nimitta long enough you'll just go into the jhana realms. The jhana realms are where the

world of the five senses doesn't exist. They are the realms where Mara⁷ cannot go, Māra is sometimes called the King of Death. I think Māra is actually etymologically derived from maraia (the Pāli word for death) so here you are getting beyond what we'd normally know as death, the dying of this body. This death meditation as I'm relaying it to you now is a great way of helping you get into the jhana states. When you are in the jhana states you're in the realm of the mind and you have literally died. The body is just put aside completely. The body in jhana is just on hold. Apparently in the sutta it does say you can die in a jhana, but I think that it happens very rarely. It's almost as if the body is just too relaxed to be really harmed. Certainly as far as heart attacks and things like that are concerned, it's hard to imagine they could happen because you're so still and so peaceful, and the body's just flowing very, very nicely. I don't think you can actually be harmed. I don't even know if that's possible.

I remember the story of a monk, who was discovered by villagers during a very deep meditation. They thought he was dead, so they were going to cremate him. Even though they put him on the fire he couldn't be burnt. On the following morning he just went on his usual alms round. It's certainly unlikely that one can really be hurt or harmed while in a jhana. You're more likely to die outside of the jhana than in a jhana, although the sutta say it is possible. Anyway, the point is that if you enter those jhanas as if you are dying you'll find it is a wonderful thing to do. It is beautiful and blissful, and of course when you come out afterwards you realize what dying is all about. Dying is letting go, it's renouncing. You're going to have to do it sooner or later.

The trouble is that when people die and are about to renounce this body and the five senses, they worry so much because they're not used to it. They struggle so hard, and then they go and get themselves another body afterwards. Then they have to do it all over again. So when we practise our meditation, we learn about these nimittas and jhanas, and we know how to die properly, we know how to let go. We've got the information or data from our new experience to know what really belongs to us and what doesn't. Certainly we know that this body and the five senses have nothing to do with us, in fact they're a pain, they're dukkha⁸. It's only the realization of the pain when the hindrances are here, and the bliss that arises when the hindrances have disappeared, that tells you that these things are suffering. Having a body is pain, it doesn't matter if you're healthy or sick, it's all the same. Everyone is in pain.

How many times do you hear beautiful Dhamma⁹ discourses and think, "Ah, this is really great", and then someone says something stupid to you, and you think, "What did he say that for?" That's sound, that's all. What do you expect? It's just the movement of the air molecules irritating the eardrum. It's just creating electrical waves in the brain that we interpret as sound, that's all. Big deal! It's seeing all the beautiful young ladies coming to the monastery, and seeing all the old ladies coming. Smelling all the delicious food, and then smelling the compost. I'm right up the hill from the compost heap, so I know every time it's dug up. It is smell that's all, no big deal. With pleasure and pain in the body, you'll always have some of each. As a human being you focus on the pain, and think that's what is most important. Then you focus on the pleasure and think it's the most important. Each one of us always gets about fifty percent of each. It's just a matter of what we happen to recall. That's all it is, it is just the senses. So why bother about them? Can't we die to them, and allow them to just disappear? Imagine what that's like. At last we are free from this aching, painful, body. It is always getting sick. It gets hungry, it has to be taken to the toilet, and it has to be scratched. Are you aching now, sitting here on your cushion, listening to me?

So when we die, we let go, we renounce. We're only letting go of what is suffering. So, big deal, imagine yourself dying. When you're meditating put the idea of the 'blanket of death' around you. Keep it around you like a shroud and as it's wrapped around you, it helps you to let go of the world. Death is a great reminder. It's saying, "Listen, you don't own anything, this body isn't yours and these senses don't belong to you". Look at DEATH, DEATH, DEATH! Look at what it's telling you. The best Dhamma discourses are shouting, "*These things aren't me, aren't mine, they're not a self*". So when you wrap yourself with the 'blanket of death', it reminds you so clearly that these things aren't yours, so why not let them go. If you do let them go then you die and get into the jhana and get reborn again afterwards. There you are, sitting on the same cushion in your hut, you come alive again. In other words, you've returned to this world. When you return to this world, you return not quite the same as before because you've seen something very powerful and deep. You've seen another world.

The three worlds of Buddhism, *tiloka* in Pali, are *kamaloka*, *rapaloka* and *arapaloka*. *Kamaloka* is the realm of the five senses, *rapaloka* is the realm of the *jhanas*, and *arapaloka* is the realm of the immaterial attainments. People only know about a tiny bit of just one of those worlds. So how do you really expect to know what Dhamma and Enlightenment are? When the Buddha said he was *lokavida*, knower of the worlds, what he meant was that he knew those three worlds, the *tiloka*. When you know those three worlds you've got perspective, you've got an overall view of what really happens. When you only know one world, you're just so narrow-minded. So in this way you've actually been out of this world and into the realm of *rapaloka* – the *jhana* realms. You've died from *kamaloka* and been reborn in the *jhana*, in *rapaloka* for a short while, and then you come back again. You understand what the difference is, you understand a huge amount of what suffering is, a huge amount of what 'self' is, and isn't. And in particular you know about the potential to 'do', about the 'doer', this 'controller' that causes so many problems. This is the why knowing what that 'controller' is, and what that 'doer' is, tells people not to do anything.

Don't give the 'controller' an inch, it will just drive you through many more lives in *samsara* – that is *Mara*, that which has power over other people's creations, the 'will', and the 'doer'. In *jhana* the potential to do is gone. You're beyond *Mara*'s control, it cannot find you there. The will cannot find you in the *jhana* because there's no will left, you're *dead*. Sometimes you see people in *jhana* who look as though they're dead. They are so still that they're hardly breathing. It is 'a dying', but it's a beautiful dying, 'a dying' where you can come back afterwards and tell other people about it, you can describe it. You understand it is a beautiful way to help you penetrate the Dhamma: *samma samadhi* – the *jhana*.

By practising dying, we're practising not to get *magga phala* in the sense of "I'm going to become a *sotapanna*"¹¹, or something else. It's 'a dying' from the will, from that which wants to gain those things. It's 'a dying' from all this doing business, all this seeing, hearing, tasting, touching business. It's 'a dying' from the busyness of your life with all its attachments, cravings, wantings, comings and goings. It's that sort of dying. That is what we want to die from. We die from all that, and what do you think can be left? Only the *jhana* realms, so go into those. If you haven't experienced *jhanas* yet, even if the *nimittas* haven't appeared to you yet, try dying. I don't mean committing suicide, I mean just sitting down, and making death your *sanna*¹², your perception, so much so that all those things that were your attachments and your possessions are seen for what they truly are, just unnecessary burdens. Imagine putting that in your mind so strongly that renouncing happens naturally. Keep it as your underlying theme, so that letting go just appears, this is not mine, I'm dying from it so it just vanishes. All the stages of meditation that I keep talking about – they just happen seamlessly, just as they do when you die, so you let go. Let go, let go, die, die, die. Then perhaps you'll understand what Ajahn Chah meant when he asked, "Have you come here to die?"

1 *Jhàna*: The deep meditation states of letting go.

2 Eightfold Path, The:

1. Right View or Understanding.
2. Right Thoughts or Intentions.
3. Right Speech.
4. Right Action.
5. Right Livelihood.
6. Right Effort.
7. Right Mindfulness.
8. Right Concentration, i.e. *jhàna*.

3 *Saiisàra*: The round of rebirth (Literally: 'wandering on').

4 *Nimitta*: A sign, characteristic. In the context of Buddhist meditation, a mental sign.

5 *Vedanà*: That quality of every conscious experience – whether through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or mind – which is either pleasant, unpleasant or somewhere in between. The English word "feeling" is not all that accurate as a translation

translation.

6 *Deva*: Literally: 'shining one', i.e. god, deity, or celestial being.

7 *Màra*: Literally, 'the killer'; often called 'the Evil One', is a tempter figure who seeks to keep beings bound to the round of rebirth

8 *Dukkha*: Suffering and unsatisfactoriness.

9 *Dhamma*: The teachings of the Buddha; the truth; the Norm.

10 *Sammà samàdhi*: Right concentration, i.e. the Four jhanas. Culminating factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

11 *Sotàpanna*: Stream Winner, the first stage of Enlightenment. One guaranteed to attain Full Enlightenment within seven lifetimes at most.

12 *Sanna*: Perception.

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